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John Glover – Sailor, Soldier, Patriot

Through expert seamanship, military leadership and pure grit, John Glover helped to save the American independence movement from possible disaster in 1776.

Glover was born to humble circumstances in Salem, Massachusetts on November 7, 1732. After the early death of his father, John, his mother and three brothers moved to nearby Marblehead, the foremost commercial fishing port in North America. An ambitious and self-made man, Glover had started to build a fleet of fishing schooners as a young adult. The short, stocky Marbleheader even commanded some of his vessels on trips to the Newfoundland coast, sharing the dangers of the long and stormy voyages along with his men. Involved heavily in the fishing industry with his large fleet, Glover traded with Spain and Portugal, as well as the West Indies. A man of energy and business ability, he soon reached a prominent position in the close-knit mercantile “codfish” aristocracy, and had earned the respect of all levels of Marblehead society.

In 1760, at the age of 28, Glover entered the political arena, joining the local Whigs in opposing Britain’s encroachment upon the political and commercial rights of the colonies. Enraged by the Boston massacre of 1770, he united with other Whigs and wrested control of town government from the pro-British faction. In 1774, he became a member of the Committee of Correspondence which spread information and coordinated anti-British action across the colonies. Additionally, he joined the local Committee of Inspection that enforced the prohibitions on trade with England that had been passed by the First Continental Congress.

As war seemed imminent, Glover, a militia officer since 1759, was commissioned a colonel of the reformed military unit which would become the 14th Massachusetts Continental Regiment, the “Marbleheaders.” Glover raised a regiment of about 500 fishermen and sailors, including a few men who were Spanish, Native American, Jewish and African-American. Those soldiers -- many of whom Glover knew personally -- united under the power of his command. In late June 1775, armed with a pair of silver pistols and a sword, Colonel Glover led his troops from Marblehead to the American camp at Cambridge, helping to bottle up the British army in Boston.

Following the British evacuation of Boston, Glover’s regiment deployed to New York in the spring of 1776 to join in the defenses of the city and surrounding areas against the British invasion. Tactical skill and leadership demonstrated by Colonel Glover at several points in the New York campaign from late August to late December registered the Marbleheader’s finest achievements and contributions to the American cause. Among

these was the brilliant evacuation from Brooklyn Heights to lower Manhattan of Washington's 9,000 men, along with horses, and artillery. Accomplished on the night of August 29, against the tide, without detection by the nearby British warships, this rescue operation is often cited as among the most daring maneuvers of the Revolutionary War.

In mid October, Glover assumed command of a brigade, and was dispatched to Eastchester, the town at St. Paul's Church, to intercept a probable amphibious invasion led by General William Howe that could cut off General Washington's retreat from northern Manhattan to Westchester County. On the morning of October 18, Glover saw British ships unloading 4,000 Hessian and British soldiers heading ashore on Pelham Bay, while Glover had four small but effective regiments of Massachusetts Continental troops at his command to try to harass the landing.

Realizing the enemy would march up Split Rock Road, Glover took advantage of the stone walls running along each side and crossing the fields, and deployed three of his regiments behind intersecting walls. These barriers provided fine cover for his outmanned troops. Waiting until the Redcoats came within range, the Americans under Glover's control stood up from behind the walls and engaged the enemy, effectively disrupting the advance of the much larger Anglo-Hessian army. Finally, in the face of a flanking movement led by General Cornwallis that could have cut off his forces, Glover ordered his brigade back down the hill, across Hutchinson Creek and up the hill to where he had left his own regiment and cannons. For the rest of the day, the two sides exchanged cannon fire. But instead of advancing, the British and German forces remained in the vicinity for the next three days. By holding off the enemy's movement, Glover helped to shield Washington's retreat to White Plains.

There, Glover rejoined the Army and was engaged at the inconclusive Battle of White Plains. Glover and his brigade crossed the Hudson, and joined the difficult American retreat across New Jersey and over the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, setting the stage for a maneuver that is perhaps his greatest legacy. On the night of December 25, 1776, Glover and his "Marbleheaders" ferried 2,400 troops – again with horses, artillery, and wagons – across the Delaware River under extreme winter weather conditions. This event is immortalized in the mid 19th century painting depicting General Washington standing in a boat crossing the ice choked river. Glover's troops also participated in the Battle of Trenton, and transported the army, as well as nearly 1000 Hessian prisoners, back across the river, all on the same day.

For these stellar military exploits of 1776, John Glover was promoted to brigadier general in February of 1777, and joined General Horatio Gates at the Battle of Saratoga, commanding a brigade. But sometime during the course of the campaign, Glover contracted what was probably malaria. While his health did not improve, he remained in the service: transporting the Convention Army, commanding troops effectively at the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778, serving at various defensive posts in the Hudson Highlands, and acting as judge and officer of the day at Major John Andre's trial and execution in the Benedict Arnold affair.

Brigadier General Glover retired from the army on July 22, 1782. He was later elected as a Federalist delegate to the Massachusetts ratifying convention for the Constitution; he served as town selectman, and in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. John Glover died from a liver infection in 1794, at age 62, perhaps caused by the illness that had weakened him for so long. Through statues, exhibitions and historic markers, Glover is commemorated in Marblehead, in Boston, in Brooklyn and at St. Paul's National Historic Site.